Claims

What is claimed is:

1. A method comprising:

    determining whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt

        of an email message;

    responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message,

        generating a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message;

        and

    inserting the hot key signal into a content signal transmitted to the user from an

        interactive television service provider via a network with which the user

        and the interactive television service provider are connected.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein determining whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the email message comprises periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

3. The method of claim 2, further comprising:

    retrieving the email message from the POP account; and

    sending the email message to the user as part of the hot key signal.

4. The method of claim 2, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

5.   The method of claim 2, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

6.   A method comprising:

receiving a hot key signal indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of a user of an interactive television service;

determining whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user; and

responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, displaying on a screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received.

7.   The method of claim 6, further comprising responsive to receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presenting to the user the email message indicated by the hot key signal.

8.   The method of claim 6, wherein determining whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user comprises determining whether a destination address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

9.   The method of claim 6, wherein the hot key signal comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the IP data packet has a header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing the email message.

11. A system comprising:

a content reception, distribution, and switching portion connected with one or more content providers to receive and redistribute interactive television (TV) content;

a head-end transport portion connected with the content reception, distribution, and switching portion to and encode, multiplex and transmit content signals from the content reception, distribution, and switching portion over a network;

a hot key generation portion to determine whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt of an email message, and responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message, generate a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message.

12. The system of claim 11, wherein the head-end transport portion receives the hot key signal from the hot key generation portion, and multiplexes the hot key signal with the content signal.

13. The system of claim 11, wherein the hot key generation portion determines whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the

email message by periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

14. The system of claim 13, wherein the hot key generation portion retrieves the email message from the POP account and includes the email message as part of the hot key signal.

15. The system of claim 13, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

16. The system of claim 13, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

17. A system comprising:

a tuner, receiver, and demodulator portion and a demultiplexor portion to receive

a hot key signal indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office

Protocol (POP) account of a user of an interactive television service; and

a processor to determine whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user and,

responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, display

on a screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received.

18. The system of claim 17, wherein the processor, responsive to receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presents to the user the email message indicated by the hot key signal.

19. The system of claim 17, wherein the processor determines whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user based on whether a destination address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

20. The system of claim 17, wherein the hot key signal comprises an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

21. The system of claim 20, wherein the IP data packet has a header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing the email message.

22. A machine-readable medium having stored thereon a series of instructions, the instructions, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to:

determine whether to inform a user of an interactive television service of receipt of an email message;

responsive to determining to inform the user of the receipt of the email message, generate a hot key signal indicating availability of the email message; and

insert the hot key signal into a content signal transmitted to the user from an interactive television service provider via a network with which the user and the interactive television service provider are connected.

23. The machine-readable medium of claim 22, wherein determining whether to inform the user of the interactive television service of receipt of the email message comprises periodically polling a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of the user.

24. The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to:

retrieve the email message from the POP account; and

send the email message to the user as part of the hot key signal.

25. The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by the interactive television service provider.

26. The machine-readable medium of claim 23, wherein the POP account is an account maintained by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) other than the interactive television service provider.

27. A machine-readable medium having stored thereon a series of instructions, the instructions, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to:

receive a hot key signal indicating receipt of an email message by a Post Office Protocol (POP) account of a user of an interactive television service;

determine whether the hot key signal is relevant to the user; and

responsive to determining the hot key signal is relevant to the user, display on a

screen an indication that the hot key signal has been received.

28.   The machine-readable medium of claim 27, further comprising responsive to

receiving an indication that the hot key is accepted, presenting to the user the

email message indicated by the hot key signal.

29.   The machine-readable medium of claim 27, wherein determining whether the hot

key signal is relevant to the user comprises determining whether a destination

address for the hot key signal is an address of the user.

30.   The machine-readable medium of claim 27, wherein the hot key signal comprises

an Internet Protocol (IP) data packet.

31.   The machine-readable medium of claim 30, wherein the IP data packet has a

header portion and a body portion, the body portion having a data field containing

the email message.